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AUTHOR Borduin, Charles M.; And Others
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ABSTRACT

Although self-reports from individual family members regarding their relationship patterns have been used to assess dysfunctional family processes, researchers often rely upon one family member as the source of such information. A study was undertaken to examine the relationship between mothers', fathers', adolescents', and observers' ratings of family affect, conflict, and dominance. Subjects included 151 intact and 114 father-absent families with a delinquent (N=135) or a normal (N=130) adolescent. Each family member completed the Family Relationship Questionnaire, providing individual ratings of the affect, conflict, and dominance for each family dyad. Observer ratings of these variables were obtained from audiotapes of family members jointly discussing and completing the Unrevealed Differences Questionnaire. The results revealed low to moderate agreement between the ratings of different family members, while there was very low agreement between the ratings of individual family members and observers. There were not substantial differences between members of delinquent and normal families in their agreement about family relations. The differences that did emerge between families with delinquent and families with normal adolescents indicated that mothers and fathers of normal adolescents showed more agreement about their affective relations with the adolescent than did mothers and fathers of delinquent adolescents. The findings suggest that it may be preferable to include multiple vantage points in studies of family relations to better represent the complex nature of intrafamily behavior. (NRB)

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Self-Report Versus Observational Assessment of Families with Delinquent Adolescents

Charles M. Borduin

University of Missouri-Columbia

Scott W. Henggeler

Memphis State University

Barton J. Mann, Julie A. Pruitt, and Bethany R. Fucci

University of Missouri-Columbia

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Running head: ASSESSMENT OF FAMILY RELATIONS

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between mothers', fathers', adolescents', and observers' ratings of family affect, conflict, and dominance. Subjects included 151 intact (mother-father-adolescent) and 114 father-absent (mother-adolescent) families with a delinquent or a normal adolescent. The results revealed low to moderate agreement between the ratings of different family members, while there was very low agreement between the ratings of individual family members and observers. There were not substantial differences between members of delinquent and normal families in their agreement about family relations. Those differences that did emerge indicated that mothers and fathers of normal adolescents showed more agreement about their affective relations with the adolescent than did mothers and fathers of delinquent adolescents. The implications of these findings for theory, research, and clinical assessment are discussed.

Self-Report Versus Observational Assessment of Families with Delinquent Adolescents

One common method of assessing dysfunctional family processes has been to obtain self reports from individual family members regarding their relationship patterns. Although family therapists (e.g., Haley, 1976; Minuchin, 1974) frequently use conjoint interviews to obtain information about family interactions, researchers often rely upon one family member, typically the mother or child, as the source of such information. Moreover, in a recent review, Bokemeier and Monroe (1983) noted that a sizeable proportion (37.5%) of researchers that did assess the perceptions of a single family member generalized these perceptions to other family members.

A main objective of the present study was to determine the extent to which family members agree with each other about different dimensions of family interaction. Previous studies have demonstrated that mothers and children in clinic samples show moderate to low agreement regarding child behavior (Herjanic, Herjanic, Brown, & Wheatt, 1975; Weissman, Orvaschel, & Padian, 1980), while in normal samples there is some evidence that mothers and children generally show substantial agreement as to maternal child-rearing practices (Brook, Whiteman, Gordon, Brenden, & Jinishian, 1980). However, a paucity of literature exists on the agreement between fathers and other family members. Researchers

have also not assessed whether families with a disturbed member are less likely to agree about intrafamily behaviors than are families that are well-adjusted.

It would also seem useful to assess the correspondence between individual family members' and observers' perceptions of family relations. This issue is of methodological importance since few studies include both self-report and observational methods, and of theoretical importance because family therapists (e.g., Minuchin, 1974) have suggested that family members share a "worldview" that may differ substantially from an observer's perceptions of family transactions.

Method

Subjects

Subjects included 151 family triads (mother, father, and a 12 to 17 year old adolescent) and 114 mother-adolescent dyads from father-absent families. Of these families, 135 (63 intact, 72 father-absent) included a delinquent adolescent who was referred by the Juvenile Court through the Memphis-Metro Youth Diversion Project (Severy & Morton, 1982), and 130 (88 intact, 42 father-absent) included a normal adolescent who was referred through local high school principals, teachers, and social service professionals. The average number of arrests for the delinquent adolescents was 3.64, and the majority (61%) of these arrests were for relatively serious crimes (e.g., assault/battery, unarmed

robbery). The normal adolescents and their family members had no history of arrest or inpatient psychiatric experience. For the entire sample, the mean age of the adolescents was 14.94 years. The families had a mean size of 6.10 members, 52% were black, 38% were Caucasian, 61% were lower class (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958), and 77% of the adolescents were male. The delinquent and normal families showed no significant differences on these demographic variables based on univariate analyses of variance and nonparametric analyses.

Procedure

Interviewers included eight graduate and advanced undergraduate students who ranged from 20 to 28 years of age. Each interviewer received several hours of pragmatic training prior to his or her first family contact in order to standardize the assessment techniques.

Families were initially contacted by phone or a home visit and were asked to participate in a study of how different families interact. If the family consented, an interview was scheduled for either the family's home or the university psychology clinic. The vast majority (94%) of experimental sessions were conducted in the family's home.

At the outset of the session, the interviewer obtained written consent and reviewed the experimental procedure. Next, the parents completed a demographic questionnaire. Each family member

then completed the Family Relationship Questionnaire (FRQ; Henggeler & Tavormina, 1980) and the Unrevealed Differences Questionnaire (URD; Henggeler & Tavormina, 1980), which were filled out privately and without discussion. After collecting the completed forms, the interviewer instructed the family members to discuss and to jointly complete the URD. A pencil and a blank questionnaire were placed on the table in front of the family, and an audiorecorder was started. Each family member was asked to announce his or her name before beginning the discussion. The interviewer then left the room until the task was completed.

Dependent Measures

Two basic sets of data were obtained during the experimental session. First, the FRQ provided individual ratings (adolescent, mother, and, in intact families, father) of the (a) affect, (b) conflict, and (c) dominance for each family dyad (mother-adolescent, father-adolescent, and mother-father). In father-absent families, only scales that pertained to the mother-adolescent dyad were employed. A second set of data was obtained from observer ratings of the (a) affect, (b) conflict, and (c) dominance of each family dyad during the audiorecorded discussion.

Self-report measures. The FRQ (Henggeler & Tavormina, 1980) is a brief, easily administered measure that was developed for use with families of varying socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds.

The FRQ is comprised of 5-point scales that assess each family member's perception of affect, conflict, and dominance within each family dyad. These dimensions of family interaction are identical to the three primary dimensions assessed in observational studies of family interaction (see Jacob, 1975, for an excellent review of this literature). The scales have adequate test-retest reliability (mean $\underline{r}$ = .70 at a two-week interval) and distinguish between the interactions of healthy families who differ in terms of social class and race (Henggeler & Tavormina, 1980). These scales also predict adolescent delinquency status and family arrest history (Hanson, Henggeler, Haefele, & Rodick, 1984), and they distinguish divorced from intact families, regardless of adolescent delinquency status (Borduin & Henggeler, 1985).

Observational measures. The URD (Henggeler & Tavormina, 1980), which is modeled after the technique developed by Ferreira (1963), provided the stimulus for the observed family interactions. The URD consists of eight items, each with three to five alternative choices. After each family member rank orders his or her personal choices for each item, the members jointly discuss and reach a rank ordering for these items. The items cover both expressive (emotional-social) and instrumental (practical) family issues.

A modification of the bipolar scales developed by Hetherington

and Frankie (1965) was used to establish qualitative, 5-point ratings of affect, conflict, and dominance for each family dyad on the discussion task. The affect scale measured acceptance, affection, understanding, and approval in family relations. The conflict scale assessed interaction along a cooperative/accommodative versus hostile/argumentative continuum. Dominance was assessed using a scale of the relative power, influence, and leadership exhibited by each family member during family interactions.

Reliability. Raters received approximately 10 hr. of training prior to the actual scoring of the audiotaped family interactions and were blind to the adolescent's delinquency status. Interrater reliability among eight raters was determined by calculating Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients between two separate ratings for each measure of the URD task on 10% of the families. Reliability ranged from .71 to .93 (M = .81) for the measures of affect, from .71 to .99 (M = .81) for the measures of conflict, and from .65 to .93 (M = .78) for the measures of dominance.

Results

Agreement Between Family Members

Pearson product-moment correlations were computed between the ratings of (a) mothers and adolescents, (b) fathers and adolescents, and (c) mothers and fathers regarding the dimensions

of affect, conflict, and dominance for each dyad (i.e., mother-adolescent, father-adolescent, mother-father). Since no significant differences were found between the ratings of mother-adolescent pairs in father-absent and intact families, the ratings from these two groups were combined. As shown in Table 1, the majority of the correlated ratings between pairs of family members were statistically significant. Nevertheless, these correlations are generally low to moderate, with only two correlations exceeding .50.

In order to test for significant differences between the correlated ratings of members of delinquent and nondelinquent families, the Pearson correlations were converted to standard scores (Fisher's z). This procedure revealed two significant differences: mothers and fathers of nondelinquent adolescents showed more agreement regarding mother-adolescent affect and father-adolescent affect than mothers and fathers of delinquent adolescents, r (88) = .55 vs. r (63) = .03, $p < .001$, and r (88) = .56 vs. r (63) = .27, $p < .05$, respectively.

Intraclass correlation coefficients (Robinson's r') were also computed between the ratings of mothers, fathers, and adolescents on each of the dyadic relationship measures (see Table 1). Because fathers' ratings were not obtained from father-absent families, these coefficients were computed only for intact families. To test whether each correlation was significantly

different from zero, we followed the guidelines of Shrout and Fleiss (1979) by calculating F_0 = BMS/WMS and testing it on n - 1 and n (K - 1) degrees of freedom. As shown in Table 1, all but one coefficient was significant at $p < .05$. There were no significant differences between the intraclass correlations of members' ratings in delinquent and nondelinquent families.

Insert Table 1 about here

Family Member-Observer Agreement

Pearson product-moment correlations were also computed between the ratings of an observer and each family member on the various dyadic relationship measures. These correlations were generally quite low, although a number of correlations did reach statistical significance (see Table 2). Since it was found that there were no significant differences between delinquent and nondelinquent families in the amount of agreement between an observer and individual family members, only correlations for the combined sample of families are reported in Table 2.

To determine whether there were significant differences in the amount of agreement that different family members had with an observer on a given measure, r to Z transformations were again performed. This procedure revealed that there was significantly more agreement between the adolescent and observer than between

the mother and observer on measures of father-adolescent affect and mother-father affect, while the opposite pattern emerged on the measure of mother-father dominance, all ps < .05 (see Table 2).

Insert Table 2 about here

Comparisons of Within-Family Agreement to Agreement Between Family Members and an Observer

To test the hypothesis that family members are more likely to agree about various aspects of family interaction than are an observer and any individual family member, we tested for significant differences between the Pearson product-moment correlations in Tables 1 (all families) and 2. In no instance did an observer and family member agree significantly ($p < .05$) more than two family members about a dimension of dyadic family relations. Instead, an opposite pattern emerged: mothers agreed significantly more with both their husbands and adolescents than with an observer on measures of mother-adolescent affect and dominance, father-adolescent affect, and mother-father affect and conflict; fathers agreed significantly more with both their wives and adolescents than with an observer on measures of mother-adolescent affect, father-adolescent affect, and mother-father conflict; and adolescents agreed significantly more with both their mothers and fathers than with an observer on the

measure of mother-father conflict. There were also numerous measures on which a given family member agreed significantly more with at least one other family member than with an observer.

Discussion

One aim of this study was to determine the amount of agreement between family members concerning the quality of their relations. The correlational analyses revealed moderate to low correlations between the ratings of pairs of family members and between the ratings of all family members. This finding indicates that while there is some similarity in family members' perceptions of their interactions, there is also evidence of disagreement and a far from perfect correspondence of perceptions. It is likely that measurement errors influenced, at least in part, the sizes of the obtained correlations. Yet, to the extent that the self-report instrument used in this study is of comparable reliability to other self-report measures of family relations (see, e.g., Olson et al., 1982), the results suggest that researchers should be cautious about generalizing from the report of one family member to another. Inasmuch as different family members may vary in their interpretations of family interactions, it seems desirable to assess several family members' perceptions when relying on self-report data.

The results unexpectedly suggest that there are not substantial differences between members of delinquent and normal

families in their agreement about family relations. Although researchers have indicated that families with delinquent adolescents evidence less warmth (Bo[illegible]n, Henggeler, Hanson, & Pruitt, 1985; Lessin & Jacob, 1984), more conflict (Ferreira & Winter, 1968; Hetherington, Stouwie, & Ridberg, 1971), and more extreme dominance by one of the parents (Hetherington et al., 1971) th[illegible] families of nondelinquents, it appears that the presence o[illegible] deviant adolescent is not related to intrafamily agreement about the quality of most areas of family interaction. Although research across other clinical samples is needed to assess the generality of the present findings, our results suggest that the level of agreement or disagreement among family members about their relations is not necessarily indicative of family health or disruption.

The few significant differences that did emerge between delinquent and normal families indicated that mothers and fathers of nondelinquents showed more agreement about mother-adolescent affect and father-adolescent affect than did parents of delinquents. An inspection of the mean ratings by mothers and fathers in delinquent families indicated that mothers rated father-adolescent relations as less warm than did fathers, while fathers rated mother-adolescent relations as less warm than did mothers. This suggests that fathers and mothers may be unwilling to credit each other for affectionate interactions with the

delinquent, or, alternatively, it may be that each parent overestimates the degree of warmth in his or her relationship with the delinquent. In either case, it appears that these parents have less consensual validation regarding their affective relations with the adolescent than do the parents of nondelinquent adolescents, which may reflect underlying communication difficulties and marital conflicts. Such a conclusion would concur with the developmental literature that implicates parental disharmony in child and adolescent behavior problems (see Emery, 1982).

Another major aim of this study was to examine the correspondence between an observer and each family member on ratings of family relations. Although there was some variation among correlations, the correlations were generally quite low and indicated that the observers and individual family members did not share similar perceptions of intrafamily behavior. Moreover, several measures, agreement between pairs of family members was significantly higher than between the observer and a given family member. These results are consistent with the systemic view of many family therapists, who contend that members inside the family system share perceptions that are quite different from observers outside the system. Although these results are not surprising, they raise an important and often neglected research issue, namely, that inconsistent findings among studies of family

relations might result, in part, from differences in measurement procedure. To help avoid interpretive problems and to maximize our understanding of family interaction processes, researchers should employ both self-report and observational methods whenever possible.

In summary, the findings of this study indicate the importance of considering the source of family interaction data when drawing conclusions about those interactions. The findings also suggest that it may be preferable to include multiple vantage points in studies of family relations to better represent the complex nature of intrafamily behavior.

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Table 1

Pearson and Intraclass Correlations Between Family Members' Ratings of Dyadic Family Relations

	Mother & Adolescent (r)			Father & Adolescent (r)			Mother & Father (r)			Mother, Father & Adolescent (r')		
Dyadic Relationship Measures	D	N	All	D	N	All	D	N	All	D	N	All
Mother-Adolescent												
affect	.14	.29***	.21**	.33***	.24*	.29**	.03	.55***	.29***	.23***	.32***	.27***
conflict	.22**	.40***	.30***	.11	.24*	.17*	.27*	.18*	.22***	.22***	.28***	.25***
dominance	.31***	.20*	.27***	.15	.11	.13	.27*	.19*	.23***	.22***	.18***	.20***
Father-Adolescent												
affect	.36***	.20*	.29***	.44***	.23*	.34***	.27*	.56***	.42***	.36***	.28***	.33***
conflict	.30**	.43***	.35***	.26*	.27**	.26***	.33***	.26**	.29***	.24***	.31***	.27***
dominance	.02	.12	.07	.04	.13	.08	.22*	.18*	.20**	.06	.13*	.09*
Mother-Father												
affect	.14	.27**	.23***	.20	.15	.18*	.20	.37***	.26***	.17**	.25***	.23***
conflict	.39***	.42***	.39***	.37***	.31***	.34***	.24*	.33***	.28***	.27***	.34***	.30***
dominance	.30**	.41***	.35***	.15	.17	.15*	.33***	.14	.24***	.27***	.22***	.25***

Note. D = families with a delinquent adolescent; N = families with a nondelinquent adolescent; All = all families. The ns for the mother and adolescent's correlated ratings of mother-adolescent relations are 135 (D), 130 (N), and 265 (All). The ns for the remainder of the correlated ratings of dyadic family relations are 63 (D), 88 (N), and 151 (All).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .005$.

Table 2

Pearson Correlations Between Each Family Member and an Observer on Ratings of Dyadic Family Relations

Dyadic Relationship Measures	Mother-Observer (r)	Father-Observer (r)	Adolescent-Observer (r)	M
Mother-Adolescent				
affect	$-.04_a$	$-.03_a$	$.16_a$*	.08
conflict	$.15_a$*	$.04_a$	$.10_a$	.10
dominance	$-.02_a$	$.07_a$	$.02_a$	.04
Father-Adolescent				
affect	$-.03_a$	$.13_{ab}$	$.23_b$***	.13
conflict	$.27_a$***	$.18_a$*	$.15_a$*	.20
dominance	$-.02_a$	$-.07_a$	$.10_a$	.06
Mother-Father				
affect	$.11_a$	$.15_{ab}$*	$.17_b$*	.11
conflict	$.10_a$	$.04_a$	$.08_a$	.07
dominance	$.21_b$***	$-.06_{ab}$	$.00_a$	.09

Note. Correlation coefficients which do not share a common subscript across rows are significantly different at least at $p < .05$. The n for mother-observer and adolescent-observer ratings of mother-adolescent relations is 265. The n for the remainder of the ratings of dyadic family relations is 151.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .005$